FEATURES

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Long Memories In New Jersey About 3rd Reich

When I reported last month on Tscherim Soobzokov, a resident of Paterson, N.J., who was accused of Nazi activities in Europe during World War II, it stimulated protests by anti-Nazi activists outside his home and threats against him and his family.

Although my associate Bill Gruver interviewed Soobzokov and his lawyer extensively before our first report on him, and obtained information from immigration authorities and the Justice Department, I feel that Soobzokov is entitled to more space to tell his side of a complicated story.

The controversy over Soobzokov centers on statements he made when he applied for entry to the United States in 1953 from Jordan, where he had fled after World War II. A native of the Soviet Union, Soobzokov, now 57, became an officer in what was allegedly a Caucasian unit of the Waffen SS, the combat arm of Hitler's storm troopers.

Soobzokov acknowledged this questionable past when he applied for immigration to the United States. But he insists, vehemently, that the SS unit he joined existed only as a cover and only on paper, and was organized by a former Albanian colonel who befriended him. Soobzokov says he used his SS officer's uniform and travel documents to go to Hungary with a group of stateless refugees who were fleeing both the Nazis and the oncoming Russians in the closing months of the war in Europe.

He blames his troubles on an attempt to discredit him by a political rival in the Circassian refugee community in New Jersey, where he settled on arrival in the United States.

Soobzokov claims, with some justice, to be the most investigated individual in the country. Yet the Immigration and Naturalization Service dropped its case against him last year, and the Justice Department ended its investigation in January, informing Soobzokov that it intended to "take no further action against him."

One Justice Department official expressed the opinion that too much time and effort had been expended on the Soobzokov investigation, when there are many ex-Nazis living in this country with far more damaging evidence against them.

For Americans, it is hard to figure out the truth in the charges and countercharges that seem to fly continually among members of the European refugee communities who found haven in this country after the nightmare of World War II. Memories fade after 36 years, and dry official documents are not always reliable.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Tscherim Soobzokov is his determination to seek public vindication.

Headlines & Footnotes: The latest government figures on handgun-related deaths show that in 1978, 10,728 Americans were killed by handguns, compared with 52 such deaths in Canada, 48 in Japan, 42 in West Germany, 34 in Switzerland, 21 in Sweden and eight in Great Britain. Meanwhile, the National Rifle Association reports that in the two months following the attempted assassination of President Reagan, it has enrolled 111,550 new members, bringing its total membership to 1,954,552.

• Officials at the beleaguered Federal Trade Commission were outraged recently at what they took to be not-so-subtle pressure by attorneys for the American Veterinary Medical Association, who were upset by the FTC's investigation of possible monopolistic practices by the association. The law firm wrote that it "is now considering the forceful submission of its positions ... to Congress and possibly other audiences." What the AVMA attorneys didn't realize was that the FTC had already called off its investigation.

• Costa Rica's energy minister, Fernando Altmann, at a recent luncheon with Saudi Arabian Oil Minister Ahmad Zaki Yamani, was discussing Costa Rica's hopes of solving its economic woes by searching for suspected oil reserves. He found the Saudi incredulous at the fact that Costa Rica has no army. Yamani chewed this over and observed: "Costa Rica has no army and no oil. But if it finds oil, it will have to have an army."

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